

**Aboriginal Two-Spirit/ LGBT migration, mobility and health:
Understanding the context of colonization and residential schools**

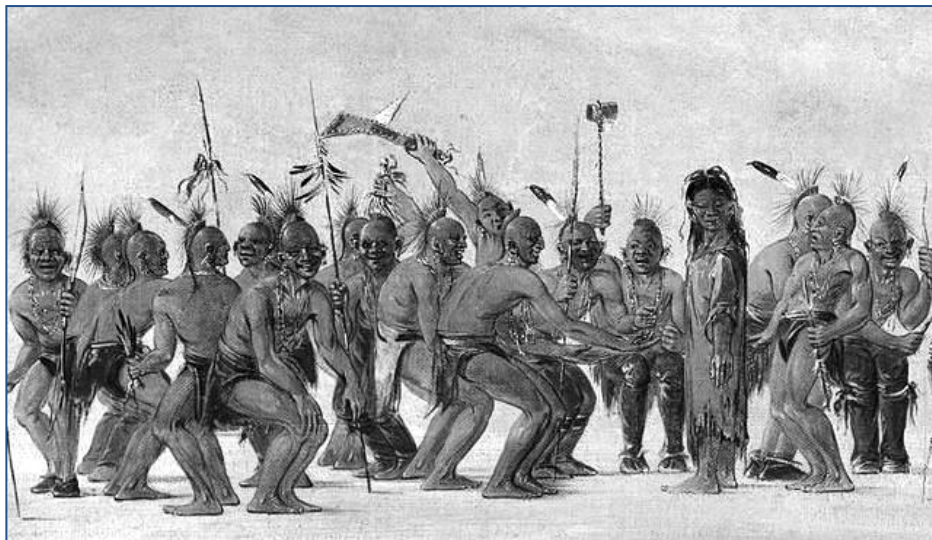
**Prairie Perspectives on Indian Residential Schools, Truth and Reconciliation Conference
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Dance to the Berdache, George Catlin (1796-1872)

Research Team

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Community-Based Research Principles

Community Consultations with Key Stakeholders:

- **In Winnipeg** contacts were made with 28 people, including 24 programs across 18 organizations.
- **Guiding Principles:** Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP).
- **Commitment to producing and sharing meaningful knowledge.**

Research Focus

- Exploration of the trajectories of migration and mobility of Aboriginal peoples who identify as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or transgender and the impact on health and well-being.
- Exploration of the intersections between sexual and gender identities with cultural/Nation and other identities within the historical and present context of colonization in Canada.

Background

- Very little research regarding the health and well-being of Two-Spirit people.
- Research on Aboriginal mobility must consider a context of colonization and forced mobility (including residential schools, foster care and adoptions).
- Contexts of homophobia and heterosexism must also be considered (recent "hate crime" against gay man on Manitoba reserve).

Methodology

- **Vancouver: 25 interviews (individual and Women's and Youth focus groups)**
- **Winnipeg: 24 interviews (13 individual and 2 focus groups - Trans and Youth)**

Criteria: 19 years of age or older; self-identify as Aboriginal (including First Nations, Inuit and Métis); self-identify as two-spirit, and/or LGBTQ, or as WSW or MSM; experiences of migration/moving; conversational English.

Recruitment: through posters at key organizations; through Advisory Committee members; through word-of-mouth.

- All received a \$25 honorarium, food and drinks

Two-Spirit

Is a contemporary term with multiple meanings.

- Conceptually the term "Two-Spirit" covers a range of identities from non-conforming gender identities to sexual orientation, to a spiritual designation.
- Naming oneself as Two-Spirit is often a political statement of belonging - of reasserting/reinserting oneself back into the circle or community.
- The traditional role of Two-Spirit people as healer, mediator, knowledge keeper, warrior, and visionary has been lost with colonization.
- There can be lot of homophobia and fear in many Aboriginal communities as a result of church schooling and influence.

We accepted and used participant self-definitions regarding their identities.

Winnipeg Participants

- **Status: 8 First Nations; 5 Métis**
- **Gender: 3 male; 11 female; 10 transgender;**
- **Sexuality: 3 gay; 3 lesbian; 6 bisexual; 7 Two-Spirit; 3 straight**
- **Age range from 19-47**
- **Education: 2 some grade school; 12 some high school; 4 high school diploma; 4 some college or University; 2 university degree and 1 specialty certificate.**

Forced mobility

Adoption/Foster care

- 10 have been taken from their biological parents.
- 4 were adopted (two by family members)
- 10 were placed in foster care. Of these, five were placed 1-3 times, one was placed 4-5 times and three were placed 6+ times.

Residential schools

- 3 participants indicated that they attended a residential school
- 16 indicated they have relatives that attended: 10 indicating this was their mother/father; 7 indicating grandparents; and 9 indicating other relatives.

Experiences in community

- 8 indicated they have been forced out of their community because of sexual or gender identity.

Main Findings from Winnipeg

Movement

Over half of the participants were born in Winnipeg

Just under half were born in reserve, Northern or rural communities.

A quarter have connections with a reserve community.

All have moved many times in their lives.

Types of Moves:

- To the city from reserve or rural communities (with parents, alone, with a partner).
- To reserve communities from the city because of family or partner connections.
- Back and forth between city and reserve communities and/or rural communities.
- Within the city multiple times.

Description of Identities

Participants describe many layers and complexities when speaking about their identities:

“Well, you know, I’m trying to find myself. I’m trying to live, but it’s hard because I don’t have a place to live and I don’t have a place to grow and I don’t have a drawn out line yet. Which is why I’m cookie dough, because I need to, I think that’s also what I need to do, is to find who I can be right now so that I could be ready to be who I have to be in the future. It’s complicated being me right now.” (20, gay, Two-Spirit, First Nations, man)

A number identified as Two-Spirit which to them meant:

Holding strengths of both man and woman;

A gift from an Elder;

A word to describe gay people and ground sexual and gender identity in spirit and Aboriginal worldview;

Healing power, positive – not connected to bars or bathhouses.

Others described their identities in the following ways:

Métis, Aboriginal, Catholic, Christian, dog owner, hockey player, information techno weenie, straight, Aboriginal woman, cultural person, Traditional, Native, anarchist, activist, Seguan (an Aboriginal gay person transforming into a trans person).

Two-Spirit

Two-spirited people are, are a word for the Indian people, you know, like but ‘bisexual’, it could be a Caucasian word, but as a two-spirit, like a Native word, a Native thing. My granny said, “You have two strengths, my boy. You’ve got two strengths. You’ve got one of a woman and one of a man, put together.” I said, yeah, you know, to use it like that, no I don’t think that people look at you different. They say you have two spirits. 2. Like I have the gentleness of a woman and the sensitivity of a woman but the masculinity of a man. (24, male, First Nations, gay, Two-Spirit)

Reasons for Moving: Links to Identity

- The majority spoke of moving to deal with negative circumstances or experiences such as violence, discrimination and abuse.
- Others also identified moving to seek community and make sense of themselves: “To be myself”, “To find myself”, “To find people like me”, “To find a partner”.

Negative Impacts of Moving

One woman said: *“Like I wanted to literally commit suicide out there because nobody accepted me because of the way I thought about women. Out here everything changed for me, like I used to be really dark, and like Winnipeg, basically this is a bit forward or too much, but like saved my life, almost, yeah.”* (19, bisexual, Métis, woman)

- Some identified the draw of a big city (visible LGBTTQ community, big enough to be anonymous)
- Others move to access voluntary or involuntary services (medical and addictions treatment, foster care, incarceration.)
- A few moved for work or study
- Others spoke of getting evicted, overstaying welcome, and falling out with friends/roommates.
- For some participants, moving allowed them to learn more about themselves also as Indigenous peoples.
- Stress: using (alcohol, drugs) – sometimes as a coping mechanism and sometimes in the context of too much partying.

- Culture shock: trouble finding a place to live and getting settled; a lack of support; and grief over change, loss of home community and connections.
- Racism and transphobia in the gay community:

“Yeah, like you know, it’s, the community is like, there’s a lot of like, I don’t know how to put it, there’s like, they hate on us two-spirited trannies. Like the gay community and I don’t understand that?” (23, Two-Spirit, Aboriginal, Trans woman)

Secondary impacts of moving:

getting involved in the sex trade; seeing friends die (due to sex trade, drug use, murder, HIV); dropping out of school; and homelessness.

Negative Impact on Health

Physical

- Physical and sexual assaults
- Stresses on the body: homelessness, drug use, survival sex work, HIV and fatigue.

Emotional

- Loneliness, isolation, and stress exacerbating mental health issues.
- Suicidality, anxiety and depression were also reported.

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Positive Impacts of Moving

- Access to resources (health, social services, social, cultural)
- Being exhilarated by a new place
- Finding a specific community and a positive peer group (such as trans, gay and Christian, HIV +)

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- Moving away from abuse or discrimination
- Refining identity (from gay to trans)
- Receiving help with dressing and transition
- Accessing Two-Spirit (positive) cultural teachings
- Reuniting with previously estranged family members.
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Resilience

Some participants emphasized the positive impacts on their emotional and spiritual wellbeing:

“... so to me, now, it’s not so important to find somewhere where I fit as a whole. You know, it’s to stay connected with all my parts (Two-Spirit, Aboriginal, Female) through the different places. So I guess support has changed what it meant cause for the longest time I was searching to fit somewhere and find that support network. Well now I have support networks all over, and to me that’s much more, and helps me build as a person.” (35, bisexual, Métis, woman)

Many participants have made their own chosen families

“But it’s, I’ve come to realize that I am not the only person. Like that’s, that’s, that’s the big issue for me. I’m not the only person. I have lots of people that I care about deeply and I, you know, like people come and go. Yes they do, but when you form relationships and family, family is very important to me. It’s something I didn’t have as a kid. I kinda made my own family as I went along. Like my children, and then, you know, my friends along the way. That’s my family. Yeah, it’s family that keeps me here.” (transwoman, 25 years, First Nations, straight)

Recommendations

The need for supports that are culture and sex/gender sensitive:

“I felt when I was coming to Winnipeg, I joined one of the programs in _____ and I’ve been in there for 2 years now,cause my family’s not traditional in any respect, so it’s different coming from my family who has no religious views and spiritual views. They’re scared of our teachings and I think that’s a whole other issue about my family and my past that I don’t have any control over. So I really felt like I needed to reclaim something I lost because they lost it.” (20, gay, Two-Spirit, First Nations, man)

The need for transition services to assist people when they first move to the city:

Having a safe “transition” house and gay centre for people to come to when they first come to the city to connect with their culture and access resources – to prevent people from being on the streets.

Participants identified a need for community activities and events that are not alcohol or bar-based, that include cultural components and are respectful of sex and gender diversity .

They spoke of a shift away from client services to collective community well-being offerings.

Yeah, cultural teachings, sweat lodges, because Aboriginal people need a reference or a place where they can identify with a past.... So I don't understand the European worldview because that's not my worldview.... So when I came here and people were like, you know, all this stuff, in English, and I was, okay, this makes absolutely no sense to me. I don't understand what it is to be a welfare client. I don't understand what it is to be in the system. It's really foreign to Aboriginal people, because when we need help, we go to a neighbour and say, can you help us? And that neighbour will. And we don't fill out forms, that hasn't been our experience. (40, First Nations, Two-Spirit, Transwoman)

Other services were suggested:

- Two-Spirit housing services
- An Aboriginal worker at the Rainbow Resource (LGBTQQ) Centre
- Métis-specific services
- Long-term substance treatment service open to transwomen
- 'Gay' group home/foster-care
- 'Gay' jail

On Reserves:

- Community workers who can talk about gender and sexuality
- More anti-homophobia and gender diversity education in reserve communities
- Gay or trans representation on council.

What stands out?

- **A theme of seeking “home”, community and belonging.**

Everyone described the sense of belonging that can come with community. Community is rooted in relationships and the connections that people have with each other and with geography. For example:

“Well, the good thing about moving was I found like Club 200, so I got more introduced to the gay scene and stuff and found out that there was actually more people like myself. Because when I was younger, I always thought, why am I like this? And how come I don't see anyone else? And then I always felt like I was alone. So moving to Winnipeg and seeing, it was just like wow.” (23, Two-Spirit, First Nations, Trans woman)

- **A theme of disconnection.**

Colonization, abuse and discrimination can cause people to be disconnected from Indigenous languages, culture and positive Aboriginal and Two-Spirit history leading to disconnection in themselves as LGBTQQ and as Aboriginal peoples. Two examples:

“One of the things that people don't realize, like for me, that isn't realized until, you know, much too late in life, but that there really is a sense of loss in having to leave somewhere and you carry that with you, you know, until you find a place where you can actually let it go.” (40, Two-Spirit, First Nations Trans Woman)

“One of the things that is very significant to me personally is the absence of home. This is my perspective as an urban Aboriginal person who has always lived in an urban context. I have no connection to a land base or to Aboriginal community.” (38, Lesbian, First Nations, woman)

The impact of forced mobility/residential schools on contemporary Two-Spirit peoples lives

- By emphasizing gendered skills sets, educational institutions and the reserve system *“represented a further endeavour toward the reconstruction of gender relations among Aboriginal populations. ... By making marriage the only possible avenue through which to convey “Indian” status and rights, the 1869 Act simply legislated European forms of heterosexuality compulsory in First Nations communities.”* (Cannon, 2004, p. 101)
- *“These colonial knowledges would influence the contemporary circumstances of Native “gays” and “lesbians”, some of whom continue to identify as “Two-spirited” people.”* (Cannon, 2004, p.100)

Conclusion

Until we conceive God as a female, women will not have that power to be treated with respect . . . The difference between Indian people and white people is that one is patriarchal in structure . . . In the Cree language, there’s no gender. The world isn’t divided into that kind of gendered hierarchy. But along the road in history, God as man met God as woman and raped her.

Tomson Highway, 1992

Indian Act, 1876

Residential Schools, 1892

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